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04 Mike Grady (Early Baseball Player)

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Mike Grady

This article was written by Charlie Weatherby

Although he was a catcher in 527 of his 922 major league games, Mike Grady is best known as a third baseman who made a record number of errors on one ground ball, a play that never happened. At 5' 11" and a muscular 190 pounds, Grady was a versatile player for the Phillies, Browns, Giants, Senators, and Cardinals for 11 seasons from 1894 to 1906. A line drive hitter with power, he had a lifetime average of .294, with 35 home runs and a career on-base percentage of .374, 226th in major league history.



A loud, abrupt, and loquacious character known for shooting from the lip, Grady, nicknamed "Michael Angelo," was a lavish spender who, according to writer Clifford Ammerman, "obviously enjoyed his status as a major league baseball player and always created quite a stir when he visited his home town ... or for that matter, when in the company of baseball fans in big league cities. The crowd followed him." Grady was noted for his numerous arguments with umpires, which earned him at least 16 major league ejections. He was also an alcoholic who drank his way out of the big leagues by 1902, only to return sober two years later. After his retirement, Grady was credited with helping a young Herb Pennock develop as a pitcher.

A native of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, Michael William Grady was born on December 23, 1869. He was the fifth of six surviving children born to Michael Grady and the former Mary Shay. The elder Grady was one of the first Irish immigrants to take up residence in the Chester County town. He worked for the Baltimore Central Railroad for over fifty years. Mary, also Irish, came to the United States at age 16.

Mike Grady learned baseball from his older twin brothers, Thomas and Timothy, with Timothy showing him the how to be a catcher. The twins played for the Mohican Baseball Club of Kennett Square in the mid-1880s; one of their teammates was a neighbor, Theodore Pennock, the father of Hall of Fame pitcher Herb.

According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Mike Grady played his first baseball game with the

Brownson club of Wilmington, Delaware, in 1888. Box scores show him playing for West Chester's Brandywine Baseball Club in 1891 and Mohican of Kennett Square in 1892.

In April 1893, Grady signed to play for Camden A. A., a team of top-notch semi-professionals that was scheduled to tour the country. His first games there were spectacular, including an impressive display of power in a 9-2 win over Burlington on May 8, when the *Inquirer* observed that "Grady... made the longest home run on the grounds. He batted the ball far over the fence, breaking the globe of a city electric light standing in a street."

Less than three weeks later, Mike and pitcher George Bausewine jumped their contracts and joined the Allentown Colts of the Pennsylvania State League. Grady continued his superb play at catcher, was soon a fan favorite, and played in 65 straight games up to August 18 when he missed the York-Allentown train. Meanwhile, he was being scouted by Colonel John I. Rogers, co-owner of the Philadelphia Phillies, who signed him for 1894. Grady played 90 games for the Colts, posting a team-leading .362 average and seven home runs.

Mike Grady made his major league debut (but didn't bat) in a 22-5 Phillies win at Brooklyn on April 24, 1894, when he was a seventh inning substitute for catcher Lave Cross. His first major league hits came in an 18-5 trouncing of Brooklyn on May 8. Reviews of Grady's work were mixed; he was described as a good catcher and a fast thrower to the bases, but was always anxious and "fighting the ball," grabbing for it before it was within reach, causing unnecessary passed balls, a problem that plagued him throughout his career. With 110 passed balls, he is 37th on the most career passed balls (since 1893) by a catcher list.

Hitting wasn't a problem. In July, facing Pittsburgh, *Sporting Life* said "Grady... hit the ball well, being in all games with timely punches. The lad acts like a comer." Batting .355 on September 1, he was among the top hitters in the league. On August 17, Grady and four of his teammates had five hits each as the Phillies pummeled pitcher Jack Wadsworth for a nine inning record 36 hits in a 29-4 annihilation of Louisville. Grady (.363) appeared in 61 games his rookie year, 45 of them behind the plate and 11 at first base.

A scrappy and aggressive player on the baseball field, Mike Grady, according to the *Kansas City Star*, "makes a fierce contest out of everything in which he indulges," including cards, shooting pool, and the semi-pro football games he played during the fall seasons of 1894-1897. He played left guard for the West Chester team in 1894 and, in a 14-10 win over the University of Pennsylvania substitutes on November 24, was cut badly by a kick in the face and had to leave the game.

In another contest, Grady jumped cleats-first onto the neck and face of Phoenixville's J. R. Dunbar, who protested. According to author Stephen Fox, Grady told Dunbar, "I'm only trying to break your neck, you _____ of a _____." Dunbar's teammates took note and after the next play Grady was carried off the field. The game went on, interrupted by occasional fistfights, with the Phoenixville players fleeing in front of an angry mob that followed them back to their hotel and then to the train station, hurling beer bottles and breaking every light on the train. Mike's most strenuous exercise thereafter was ice skating on the frozen ponds of Kennett Square.

During the spring of 1895, Phillies manager Arthur Irwin appointed Mike captain of the reserves, substitute players Grady took to calling "yannigans" as they engaged the regulars in spirited intrasquad games during his four years with the club. A 1918 *Washington Post* article credited Grady with coining the word "yannigan." As an Irishman he knew that "in the ancient Celtic tongue Yanigan means anything that can be easily beaten, like carpets." The *New Dickson Baseball Dictionary* says Jerry Denny, a third baseman for Providence in 1884, is responsible for dumping the name yannigan on rookies. Dickson pinpointed 1898 as the first yannigan usage, so it's likely that Mike Grady popularized it in 1895, and it continued to appear during the twentieth century's first three decades. An avid reader and letter-writer, Grady, according to the *Post*, was also said to be the originator of "lalapaloosa."

Grady continued to be a backup (.325, 46 games) for the 1895 Phillies. In May, *Sporting Life* described him as "a very valuable man...able to satisfactorily fill most any of the positions on the nine outside of the pitcher's box, and he can always be relied upon to hit the ball, especially at critical times."

Mike did double-duty on June 8 in an 8-7 loss to Cleveland. Umpire Jim McDonald wasn't present for the beginning of the game so Grady and Cleveland's Chippy McGarr were pressed into service as arbiters (McGarr behind the plate, Grady at first) until McDonald showed up in the bottom of the second. Grady entered the game in the fourth for injured catcher Dick Buckley, notching two bunt hits and a run. He was an umpire for a second time on June 26, 1901, when he was behind home plate in a 5-4 Washington win over Philadelphia.

Mike was inconsistent during Philadelphia's 1896 season. He was hitting a league-leading .408 in June, but on August 22, *Sporting Life* said, "Grady has been putting up a very sloppy

game behind the plate of late, and has fallen down completely in batting." He finished the season with a hardly shabby .318 average. Mike appeared in 72 games for the Phillies, 61 at catcher. His .942 fielding percentage was an improvement over those of his first two years.

In January 1897, the press speculated that Grady's days with Philadelphia were numbered. George C. Stallings, the Phillies' new manager, favored his three other catchers, Cross, Boyle and Clements. Grady saw action in only four early games, with *Sporting Life* noting that a loss to Baltimore "was primarily due to the wretched battery work of [Jack] Taylor and Grady." In mid-May, Stallings loaned Mike to the Philadelphia Athletics of the Class B Atlantic League, where he hit .200 in four games. On June 1, 1897, he was traded by Philadelphia with Kid Carsey to the St. Louis Browns for Ed McFarland. According to the *Inquirer*, "Stallings...never had any use for the one-time chief of the Yanigans."

Chris Von der Ahe, manager of the light-hitting Browns, wanted Grady because of his hard-hitting reputation and ability to play first base. The trade paid immediate dividends; after a 1-0 St. Louis win over Brooklyn on June 3, *Sporting Life* said "Grady...played first base and put lots of life into the Browns playing." In late-July, the magazine noted that "Grady is gradually getting first base down fine, and is proving a strong man [at the plate]." In early August, he won seven pounds of tobacco from a Louisville firm when he pounded seven home runs during a St. Louis home stand.

St. Louis, one of the worst clubs in major league history, had an 18-game losing streak from September 3 to September 26. Frustrated, an unruly Grady earned an ejection and \$30 fine during an August 19 game against Brooklyn. Getting drunk caused more trouble. One of several players who were disciplined, Grady, said *Sporting Life*, "was docked \$100 for emptying several breweries in Boston and Pittsburg and incidentally putting a waiter out in the former city." The magazine later offered this perspective: "That Grady imbibed too freely...while not condoned is not to be wondered at...If there ever was a more disorganized alleged ball club than Von der Ahe's crew last season the history of the league does not reveal it. It was enough to drive any player to drink."

Grady (.279) poled eight homers for the Browns, fourth in the league; his fielding percentage (.974) was tarnished by 23 errors at first base. On November 11, 1897, he was traded by the St. Louis Browns with Fred Hartman to the New York Giants for Jim Donnelly, Ducky Holmes and \$3,500.

Grady hit two home runs in consecutive games with Boston in early May 1898, but it was

only a few days later when *Sporting Life* said "Grady's batting is particularly disappointing." There was also his habit of arguing with umpires, which earned him five ejections. By mid-July, the magazine announced that "Grady is out of favor in New York because of his continual talking and constant kicking." In August, the Baltimore *Morning Herald* took this view: "A Kodak view of Mike Grady's brain would look like a glass of liquefied air." In 93 games, Grady played 57 at catcher, 30 in the outfield, and hit .296. His 22 passed balls were fourth in the league.

On October 24, 1898, Mike Grady married Estella F. Balsley at St. Edwards Church in her native Philadelphia. No children were born from this union. The couple divorced sometime before 1920.

Grady continued to be a utility player for the 1899 Giants, mostly at catcher and third base. He was the Giants' leading hitter (.337), and was particularly hot between May 26 and June 9 when he went 26-for-38. He had three four-hit games during the season, including August 18, when he was 4-for-4 with a single, double, and two triples in a 5-4 win over Cincinnati. In late August, *Sporting Life* remarked that he was doing nicely at third and was a valuable player, but "would do well to cut out about 50% of his tendency to kick...his kicking often results in nothing but wasted effort."

Mike's season was cut short in an early September against Baltimore when he was injured in a collision at home plate. Water formed under his kneecap, and he was out for the rest of the season, walking with the aid of a cane well beyond mid-October. Grady spent an extended period of time at home in Kennett Square after his brother Timothy died suddenly at age 34 on September 4.

Since 1910, numerous sources have described Mike Grady's record-setting four, five or six errors during a play he butchered at third base, supposedly in 1895, 1899, or at Chicago's West Side Park. In one version of the play, a ground ball to Grady was fumbled for an error (1); belated wild throw across the diamond (2); runner heads to third, Grady receives and can't hold the return throw, runner would have been out if he had (3); runner scrambles to his feet and heads home, Grady retrieves the ball and traps him in a run-down, should have tagged him out at third, but muffed the play (4); runner again heads home, Grady recovers the ball and would have gotten his man at the plate, but the throw was wild (5).

The play never happened. Baseball historian Bill Deane found that Grady only played 51 games at third base in his 11-year career and never made more than three errors in any

game there, let alone in one at bat. His three error game was against Cleveland on August 25, 1899. "Could that have been the infamous day, with just the error count exaggerated," Deane asks. "Nope, Cleveland scored four runs that day, and all four were earned. And *Sporting Life's* account of the game includes no mention of Grady." Deane's conclusion: "I suspect Grady, like Wally Pipp and Bob Uecker, got a lot of mileage in telling self-deprecating stories about himself, and wouldn't let the truth stand in the way of a good yarn."

On April 26, 1900, Mike Grady, George Davis, and Kid Gleason were riding a streetcar bound for New York's Polo Grounds when they came upon an apartment house fully engulfed in flames on West 144th Street. The ballplayers were among the first on the scene and, according to the *New York World*, "worked like trojans in carrying down the helpless." At least 200 people were in the structure when the fire started and no lives were apparently lost. Firemen, passersby, and the ballplayers were hailed as heroes for their efforts.

Grady and the rough-and-tumble Gleason were roommates on the road during their time with the Giants. One night the team was bunking in a "pitcher and bowl" establishment, an old-fashioned hotel without running water in the rooms. After a few drinks too many, the pair were joking around with each other and Mike said something that stung the Kid pretty hard. Gleason promptly grabbed the water pitcher and smashed it over Grady's head. According to the *Gazette-Telegraph*, "He must have hit a hard spot, because it never fazed Grady, who winked his eye and apologized to the 'Kid.'"

Mike's early season performance was sub-par. *Sporting Life*, in mid-June, observed that "Grady has not caught a game since June 5, when he contributed three errors; this...with the fact that his average is only .250 accounts for his absence." In early July, the magazine reported that he had been shifted from shortstop to first base and said, "Grady and his temper came in for some warm roasts last week, and the touching up was not amiss. Grady would do well to control his temper, and incidentally cut out his everlasting senseless kicking." Later in the month, the press reported that the Giants were anxious to trade him.

On September 14, in the fourth inning of a 5-1 New York win against Chicago, the Giants had the bases loaded with Jack Doyle at third, George Davis at second, and Grady at first. With Pink Hawley at bat and pitcher Ned Garvin on the mound, Doyle broke for the plate, with Davis and Grady heading for third and second. Garvin fired a pitch and catcher Johnny Kling dropped the ball as Doyle slid over the plate with the run. According to Peter Morris's *A Game of Inches*, this triple steal is the earliest ever uncovered in major league

history.

Mike Grady's performance plummeted as the 1900 Giants finished eighth. He hit .219, was used as a catcher and infielder, and had 37 errors and a .905 fielding percentage.

Grady and 21 other major leaguers from four clubs traveled to Cuba in late October for a series of exhibition games. Due to a misunderstanding with the Cuban clubs, the original terms of the agreement had to be scrapped, and a hastily scheduled lineup of games was cobbled together, some of which were delayed because of field reservation conflicts. Others had to be canceled. Ten of the players became disgusted and returned home early. Grady, who had taken his wife on the trip, was one of them, and assured the press that everyone came back with empty pockets. He had little good to say about Cuba, and added that T. C. Simpson, secretary of the Brooklyn club who had engineered the trip, had so mismanaged it that, as the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* put it, "the whole thing was a frost." To add insult to injury, Mrs. Grady's luggage had been lost en route.

Disgusted with what he perceived as ill-treatment in the National League, Mike Grady received a telegram from Washington manager Jim Manning in early April 1901 and soon jumped from New York to the Senators, one of nine Giants who moved to the fledgling American League during the baseball war of 1901-1902. In Grady's opinion, as told to the *Washington Post*, "I have never played for a good manager before, and from what I know of Manning, it will be a pleasure to play for him. I have the name of being one of the hardest men in the country to manage, but just tell the people that believe it to keep an eye on one Mike Grady this season and they will learn a few things about how a player should act and also a few new wrinkles in ball playing."

Picked to finish last in the American League, Washington was three games above .500 by the end of June. In the opinion of the *Morning Herald*, the Senators "have had the advantage of excellent battery work. Mike Grady seems to be paying more attention to the game and less to the umpire," a result that was caused by a standing bet with Manning of twenty-five cents worth of cigars that he would be thrown out of every game because of arguing. According to the *Washington Times*, "Whenever the Senatorial catcher becomes obstreperous, a fellow-player will remind him of the wager and he instantly cools off."

Mike Grady missed some July games with a hand injury. He also went down in August when he was spiked by Iron Man McGinnity. Grady played in 94 games for the Senators, 59 at first base and 30 at catcher. The club was first in the league in defense but lacked punch and was

next to last in offense. Mike wasn't the problem in the latter category, posting a .285 average. He finished third in the league with nine home runs and ninth in slugging (.470).

Grady was unable to find major league work after the 1901 season. He was considered to be a good man on the field, but, in the words of the *Pittsburgh Press*, "his too convivial habits [excessive drinking] made him unreliable." Instead, he settled for a position with Kansas City of the American Association.

Appointed as team captain, Mike was still his pugnacious self. On June 8 in Minneapolis, he was blocked by third baseman Bill Phyle, resulting in a fist fight and ejection for both. On July 8 at Milwaukee, he was given the boot for excessive arguing. Grady earned a \$200 fine in mid-August when he pulled the Blues off the field after a game-long dispute with umpire Haskell. Through it all, *Sporting Life* said "Mike Grady has endeared himself in the hearts of the Kansas City fans by his clever work." He was the leading hitter for fourth-place Kansas City, posting a .325 average.

Mike returned to Kansas City as captain in 1903. In late August, the *Toledo Sunday Bee* said "Mike Grady is giving satisfaction at the third corner, and rarely makes an error at that dangerous spot. He is lambasting the pill in earnest, and much of the success of [Kansas City] is due to the former backstop's good eye." His season was cut short by injuries in early September, but he finished second in the league's batting race with a .355 average in 120 games.

By February 1904, positive press reports paved the way for Mike's return to the majors. In the view of the *Pittsburgh Press*, "Since going with Kansas City, [Grady] has remained strictly sober, and the reports to his conduct have been excellent." Impressed with Mike's prospects, St. Louis Cardinals arranged a trade for him with Kansas City; Cardinals manager Kid Nichols wanted him to do the bulk of the catching.

By mid-June, Grady was hitting over .400 and was the National League's leading batsman, having failed to hit safely in only three games since the beginning of the season. In late August, the *St. Louis Republic* was singing his praises: "Mike is clouting the ball at a terrific clip... [He] hits the ball with more force than any batter in the league."

Grady played a career-high 101 games and hit .313, fourth in the league; his slugging percentage (.474) was second, and he was seventh with five home runs. According to the *Oakland Tribune*, "Mike Grady is sure of his place on the Cardinals next year. Mike's

throwing to the bases was not any too good last season, but his timely swats made up for the deficiency in fielding." He signed a two year contract with the Cardinals in early December.

At age 35, Grady's career headed downhill in 1905. He performed well early, but badly sprained his knee on May 21 in a home plate collision, sidelining him for three weeks. In late August, the *Boston Globe* noted that "Grady is one of the most valuable catchers in the National League, as he can hit as well as backstop and is up-to-date on the fine points of play."

The 1905 Cardinals had three managers and considered getting another one for 1906; Grady nominated himself in early October by telling the press that he would make the St. Louis a first-division team if he was given the job. The *Post's* reaction: "Mike Grady solicits the job of manager of the Cardinals. If someone can be found to manage Mike the combination might work to the advantage of the club." By late November, reports said that Grady (.286) was trade-bait, but other clubs weren't biting, probably because he was, in the view of the *Ft. Wayne News*, "a disturbing factor on the St. Louis team."

Cardinals' president Robison, after considering Grady's interest, retained manager John McCloskey; it was the last straw for Mike, who said he was tired of St. Louis and wanted out. The Cardinals, still trying to deal him elsewhere, hung on to the disruptive slugger and his declining average (.250). Grady (1-for-3) caught pitcher Ed Karger in his last major league appearance on September 19, a 4-0 loss in Philadelphia.

In the *Seattle Times* opinion, "Mike Grady had just one virtue as a baseball player. He can hit a long fly ball. As a receiver he is lax on pitches, drops a lot of them and his arm is on the blinkerino. He ... was more or less a professional agitator... and really was not at all a desirable man to have about. And he was after McCloskey's job, too... it can be easily seen from every standpoint that the angelic Michael was not the worst riddance in the world. Grady would make a good man in one respect – to hit for pitchers or weak batters in pinches toward the end of the game. In a small park his flail would assert itself to effect now and then."

Grady also got on base the hard way; he was hit by pitches 73 times in his career, 183rd in major league history. He stole 114 bases, but was caught stealing 435 times (87th). Some of the criticism of his catching is valid; he allowed 750 stolen bases (70th), and committed 132 errors behind the dish (99th).

In March 1907, Mike was still the property of the Cardinals but had not been signed or, as promised, traded; he appealed to the National Commission for his release and it was granted in early April. With no major league suitors, Mike was signed for \$3,500 by William Connolly, president and manager of the Wilmington Peaches of the Tri-State League.

Wilmington got off to a 3-16 start under Connolly, who hired recently deposed Johnstown manager Charles Atherton to pilot the team on May 18. Atherton lasted less than five weeks, leaving his post on June 22 to be with his ill mother in Cleveland. Mike Grady succeeded him as team manager and captain. The Wilmington *Sunday Morning Star* noted that "no man ever worked harder for a ball club than Mike." Under his stewardship, the players were hitting and fielding well, working together, and "playing snappy ball" as they won seven of nine games.

Although the team played well, Grady still had problems with umpires. He was ejected on June 10 by umpire Moran, who assessed a five dollar fine. Before the next day's game, Mike approached Moran on the field and gave him a bag of 500 pennies. Moran refused them and threatened him with another ejection if he didn't pay with greenbacks. The standoff was halted when President Connolly emerged from the stands and gave Moran a five dollar bill.

The Peaches performed poorly down the stretch, losing 26 of 38 after August 4, including every game during the season's last week, surrendering sixth place to Johnstown. Wilmington (43-79, seventh) finished 42 games behind pennant-winning Williamsport. Mike was Wilmington's leading hitter (.276, 101 games). He made his only professional pitching appearance in the season finale on September 14 at Johnstown, giving up 13 hits and two walks in a 6-2 loss that *Sporting Life* called "a farcical victory... Neither side played any ball; the players all worked to get the game over as quickly as possible." The contest took only 57 minutes.

On September 23, 1907, Wilmington announced that Grady would return as manager in 1908, a tenure that lasted just three weeks before he resigned on May 20. He remained with the team as captain and catcher, but was unhappy, telling the press in late June that he was done with the game and planned to go into the hotel business. A month later, he said that he would leave baseball and devote his time to his brick manufacturing business in Kennett Square. Neither plan materialized. He was released by Wilmington on July 30 and signed with the Tri-State's Lancaster Red Roses a day later. Grady (.235) appeared in a combined 79 games for Wilmington and Lancaster. In two partial seasons, his managerial record was 38-

56, .404.

Grady started 1909 with Lancaster, but didn't get along well with manager Marty Hogan and was sold to the Harrisburg Senators in early May. He was most noticeable during the early season filling in as an umpire, working a Williamsport-Harrisburg game in late April and a Reading-Harrisburg game on May 6. Mike was used as a pinch-hitter by the Senators, but was released in mid-July after being ill for several weeks. He appeared in 40 games for Lancaster and Harrisburg, hitting .259. Grady was signed by the Little Rock Travelers on August 9, posting a .175 average in 22 games as a catcher/first baseman. Little Rock's players were purchased by Chattanooga after the 1909 season, and Grady was released on December 14, ending his professional career.

Now age 40, Mike returned to Kennett Square, where he lived with his mother and sister on South St. He had owned a quarry and brick manufacturing plant for years; in 1909, he became associated with American Road Machinery, which produced graders, steamrollers, and rock breakers. He also worked with his brother Thomas, a contractor, until Thomas died in 1920.

Grady was active in Chester County baseball in 1910. In July, he caught 16-year-old Herb Pennock in two games, one for the Mohican club and another for Kennett Square, a 5-2 victory on the 23rd in which the future Hall of Famer fanned ten Sharpless A. A. batters. Mike first saw Herb as a left-handed catcher with the Cedarcroft Academy baseball team and told him to get out of catching and stick to pitching. According to Frank Vaccaro's Pennock biography, Grady "made [him] his personal project." The hurler told *The Sporting News* shortly after Mike's death, "He coached us all. He showed me how to break off a curve, instead of throwing a roundhouse."

In August, Grady became field manager of the Coatesville independent team, which won five of six games against Brandywine in September. Sensational news broke on September 24 when it was announced that Grady had exposed a plot by two of his players, Hennessey and Sundheim, to throw that day's game at West Chester to Brandywine. The two players and a Coatesville hotel bartender, "Big Frank," had placed heavy wagers on Brandywine to win. Both players confessed and were immediately released. According to the *Inquirer*, the fans in Coatesville "were so indignant that they drove the two players from the town."

Mike's final game for Kennett Square was in June 1911 when he played first base in a 4-2 loss to Westmoreland of Camden. Thereafter, he coached Kennett in 1912, managed an

amateur club in Wilmington, and took an interest in local baseball.

By January 1920, Grady was living on East South Street with his sister Annie and her husband Albert Keating. He continued to live there until, after a two-year illness, he died of hardening of the arteries on December 3, 1943. He was survived by his sisters, Annie and Mary. Funeral services were held on December 6 at St. Patrick's Church, and internment was in St. Patrick's Cemetery. He was inducted into the Chester County Sports Hall of Fame on November 13, 2010.

Thanks to Bill Deane for sharing his research on the myth of Mike Grady's multi-error game.

July 13, 2011

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